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The spirit of Asia's youth will serve it well

Bernard Chan looks into the challenges that worry the region's future leaders

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What are the biggest problems facing Asia in the future? Perhaps the best people to answer the question are members of the younger generation - the ones who will, after all, have to come up with the solutions the region will need.

The Asia Business Council did just that last year with an essay contest titled "Asia's Challenge 2020", and the response was so great, and the quality of the essays so good, that extracts have now been turned into a book, *Through the Eyes of Tiger Cubs*.

One thing that comes through clearly in the book is that the young writers are genuinely worried about Asia's future.

In the West, there is an assumption that the future belongs to this region and we are now in the Asian century. Some opinion polls show that many Americans believe that China has the biggest economy in the world when it is not even half the size of the US'. Given the problems in Europe and the

US, maybe it is not surprising that they exaggerate how well Asia is doing.

In Asia itself, we are probably more realistic; we do have serious problems regarding demographics, the environment and the sustainability of our economic models. But many of us also put these in the context of the past. The older generation has clear memories of wars, riots and revolutions from the 1930s to the 1960s, and the middle-aged remember distinctly poorer times. Asia has seen amazing development since the 1970s, with hundreds of millions lifted from poverty. The challenges are real, but the progress of the past few decades leaves us basically optimistic.

The younger generation, however, is less aware of the difficulties of the past. The essay writers, obviously well educated, have probably grown up in relatively prosperous surroundings. Also, as the internet generation, they are very informed about the world. The result is that, when they look at the future, they see a lot to worry about.

Some of their concerns are predictable; they are worried that the traditional rote-learning approach found in education systems in Asia is leaving them with poor creative and workplace skills. The huge numbers of Chinese and Indian scientists working in the West suggests that this is not the whole picture, but it is a fair point, and one we in Hong Kong are very much aware of.

They are also probably right to be concerned about growing inequality. The older generation of Asians has probably been content to see the vast majority of people enjoying rising living standards, even if some are getting richer much faster than others. Such a gap is not sustainable - again, as we know from our own experience in Hong Kong. One essay writer from India actually proposes that governments deliberately reduce the expansion of big cities like Shanghai and Mumbai in order to spread opportunities around other communities.

In some cases, the young writers are perhaps being too pessimistic. Several point out that Asia has the majority of the world's poor and fear that providing the population with food, water and energy in the future will be too much of a challenge. I would not underestimate these problems, shared by all on this planet, but past experience shows that the human race is smart enough to come up with solutions. Interestingly, the writers are less

concerned with the ageing population.

On the whole, the book shows that Asia will be passing into capable hands. Improved corporate social responsibility and a bigger role for non-governmental organisations in fighting corruption are typical suggestions. There is also some real idealism, including a call for a common Asian currency - which events in Europe suggest might not yet be a good idea.

Not least, the book reflects a backlash against consumerism, with one writer criticising Asian cities' obsession with having giant skyscrapers and "the tallest Ferris wheel [and] the biggest casinos". That is a stimulating thought: it is the older generation, not the younger, which is impressed by these things.

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